

# Guest Editors' Introduction: Recovery after Work

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## Guest Editors' Introduction: Recovery after Work

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The origins of this special issue grew from two small group meetings on recovery from work. The first was held in the University of Surrey, UK in 2008, and this meeting attracted researchers from nine different European Countries and the United States of America. The second meeting in 2013 was held in the Flagstad Conference Centre, Hamar, Norway, and was sponsored by Lillehammer University College and funded from the 'Internasjonale Utvalget' (International Council), Norway. The purpose of these workshops was to bring together researchers working in broad areas of psychology, biology, medicine and ergonomics who have an interest in the multi-disciplinary aspects of recovery. In both meetings, we were completely overwhelmed by the interest and the number of researchers out there, and we have always had to turn away more people than we could accommodate.

Although these meetings have always been congenial, we have not been harmonious in terms of the decisions we put forward. For example, simply trying to define what is 'recovery' has proved to be quite a challenge, and what has become clear is that a number of similar but quite different terms have been used to refer to what is essentially a similar process. For example, the words

rest, relaxation, recuperation, recreation, restoration, respite, rewind, unwind, and recovery...

have all been used in the literature. We have also heard people talk about the need to 'decompress' after an intense period of work. Thus, not only are different words used to describe a similar process, the same words may be used in slightly different ways. This is partly because of the rise in the number of international researchers working in the area, as different countries seem to have slightly different conceptualisations and meanings of the words. We think, however, we can agree that recovery in the work context generally means something that has been lost and the process of returning to a former state. Work is often demanding, and in order to work effectively, we

have to expend energy during the day. We can think about the different forms of energy: cognitive (thinking/planning concentration etc), emotional (trying not to lose your temper when things go wrong or colleagues/customers annoy us), physical (doing manual work, typing or just sitting in the same position for most of the day if office based) and physiological (the need to eat and drink). Thus, working requires effort expenditure, and draws on our physical, cognitive and emotional resources. When such resources are stretched, due to high demands or stress, we begin to feel strained and in need of a break. Without sufficient recovery breaks, this can lead to fatigue and in the long term can develop into a number of other negative health symptoms.

Over the past 15 years, 'recovery research' has attracted increasing attention from a number of different academics working in a diverse range of disciplines including environmental, health, occupational psychology, biological and medical scientists. This has culminated in rapid progress in terms of theory, and empirical research, and there was a special issue in this area in 2006 (Zijlstra & Sonnentag, 2006). In the present issue, we have brought together a range of articles to reflect not only the state of play, but also to raise new questions, theoretical and methodological approaches, and provide new findings in the broad area of recovery from work. The key aim of the special issue is to address current issues in the broad area of 'Recovery from Work'. We realize this is only a snap-shot of the most recent work and represents only a small window of the different types of work currently being conducted. Because of space concerns, we had to be selective and limit this volume to seven articles.

Notwithstanding, we have provided, however, a selection of papers that add new, advance existing theories or insights, or test existing theories using traditional and pioneering methodologies. The first article, by Jos Brosschot and colleagues, puts forward and empirically tests an intriguing notion that we may not be aware of the cause underlying our stress responses. The theory that stress reactions can continue long after the initial stress episode and is because of the process of un or subconscious worry is quite novel and thought provoking, and if supported will challenge a lot of our notions about stress and the recovery process.

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In the next paper, Zoccola and colleagues, present findings from their laboratory study that manipulated different styles of ruminative thinking (concrete imagery, abstract imagery, concrete verbal thought, or abstract verbal thought) on anxiety and blood pressure responses following the completion of a stress-inducing speech task. They report that physiological and psychological responses appear to be dependent upon the mode of inducing stressor-focused rumination of thought. Such findings have important implications for how we assess psychological detachment in the real world and for future intervention studies.

The next two studies utilized diary methodology. The first by Madelon van Hoof and colleagues examines how the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs—autonomy, relatedness and competence—affect the post-work recovery process. Data were collected by means of a daily diary over a working week. The results indicated that better need satisfaction contribute to improved recovery (higher vigour, lower anxiety) at bedtime and that lower recovery just prior to bedtime was related to lower need satisfaction the following day. In the second study entitled ‘Illegitimate tasks and sleep quality—an ambulatory study’—Diana Pereira et al., investigate the short-term effect of illegitimate tasks on sleep quality, using diaries and sleep actigraphy. In this paper, the concept of ‘illegitimate tasks’ is used to demonstrate that when people have to do tasks that go against their own feelings of pride or justice (because they are boring, or clearly redundant or useless, or below someone’s experience or standing in the organization), they can be seen as a social stressor (offense to self). In turn, social stressors affect people’s feeling of self-worth and affect level of sleep (sleep onset latency, and sleep fragmentation), which leads them to feel less recovered from work.

Moving away from laboratory studies, Hamesch et al., reports the results of a 6-month longitudinal study that examined recovery in student dentists. More specifically, the study examined the mediation effects of personality and affective and problem-solving rumination on depression. Using a moderated mediation model, the researchers demonstrate that neuroticism not conscientiousness was found to moderate the demand-affective rumination association, but this was dependent on levels of neuroticism in

that affective rumination mediated the impact of demands on psychological health only for individuals low in neuroticism. The findings echo existing literature regarding the high demands and stress faced by students, and highlights the need for the introduction of stress interventions during training to prevent negative psychological health outcomes long term in students once qualified.

In a second longitudinal study, Jessica de Bloom et al., follow a group of compulsive and non-compulsive workers over a vacation and asks whether obsessive workers go cold turkey during their holiday. Work-related rumination and well-being were assessed in 54 employees before, during and after a long summer vacation. Levels of rumination declined during vacation and remained below baseline until 2 weeks after vacation. Initial differences in rumination between workaholics and non-workaholics disappeared during and after vacation. Increases in well-being during and decreases after vacation were greater in work addicts than in non-addicts. Thus, vacations seem to temporarily offset characteristic differences between workaholics and non-workaholics, decrease rumination and improve well-being—and the findings offered more support for a ‘relief’ rather than a ‘withdrawal’ role of vacations for obsessive workers.

The final article by Zijlstra et al., contributes to the discussion on recovery from work by redefining the notion of recovery itself. In offering a new conceptualization, these authors argue that ‘recovery’ is never fully obtained as it should really be considered as a continuous dynamic process. Individuals who are motivated to ‘recover’ from task demands do so by harmonizing their ‘actual state’ (psycho-physiological) with the state that is ‘required’ (psycho-physiological) at that moment. Complete recovery is not possible as the system is always in flux.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge our gratitude to a number of people, who if not for their vision, insight, drive and patience, this special issue would not have been possible. To this end, we would like thank Mina Westman and Cary Cooper for their support and enthusiasm for this project. We would also particularly like to thank Tahira Probst, as without her initial backing, this special issue would not be possible, and of course, we would like say thank you to all those who have contributed to this volume.

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